**07 Political Participation**

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The Tea Party movement is a loose network of conservative activists organized to protest high taxes, excessive government spending, and big government in general.

**What We Learned**

***1. How do individuals participate in the policy process?*** Voting is the most common form of participation. People also participate in election campaigns, contact public officials, join interest groups, take part in protest demonstrations, or engage in unconventional acts, sometimes including violence.

***2. What factors influence participation, and who tends to participate?*** The most important factors influencing individual participation are personal resources, psychological engagement, voter mobilization, and community involvement. Personal resources include time, money, and civic skills, such as communication skills and organizational ability. People take part in the policymaking process when they are knowledgeable, interested, and have a strong sense of political efficacy. Participation also depends on voter mobilization. Finally, people participate politically because of their involvement in the community.

Participation rates vary among individuals based on such factors as income, age, race/ethnicity, and gender. The higher the family income, the more likely a person will vote and participate in other ways. Voting participation increases with age until the latter years of life when participation declines because of ill health and infirmity. Voter participation rates are highest for whites and African Americans, but lower for Asian Americans and Latinos. Women are more likely to vote than men, but men are more likely to engage in other forms of participation.

***3. How has voter turnout in the United States changed in recent elections, and how does it compare with turnout in other democracies?*** Political scientists who study election participation measure voter turnout relative to the size of the voting eligible population (VEP), which is the number of U.S. residents who are legally qualified to vote. Rates of voter participation fell from 1968 through the 1996 election, but they have subsequently rebounded because of sophisticated voter mobilization campaigns coupled with increased public interest.

Voter participation rates in the United States are relatively low compared with turnout rates in many other democracies because American election procedures are relatively cumbersome, political parties and interest groups are relatively weak, and many citizens do not perceive that elections have much effect on public policy.

***4. How do the patterns of participation in the United States affect public policies, and what can be done to increase participation?*** People who participate in the policy process are more conservative than the population as a whole on economic issues. Compared with the general population, political activists are less likely to support government spending for public services, government help for minority groups, and programs to assist the poor. Those observers who worry about low voter turnout favor the enactment of election-law reforms to enhance participation rates, including streamlined registration procedures, easy access to absentee ballots, and mail voting.

**Tips for Success**

**Listen to the podcasts:** The text website – www.thethinkspot.com – has a series of short podcasts discussing concepts from the textbook. Download them and listen to them on your headphones while driving, exercising, or working around the house.

**Key Terms**

**Compulsory Voting**

the legal requirement that citizens participate in national elections

**National Voter Registration Act (NVRA)**

federal law designed to make it easier for citizens to register to vote; also known as the Motor Voter Act

**Political Efficacy**

the extent to which individuals believe they can influence the policymaking process

**Political Movement**

a group of people that wants to convince other citizens and/or government officials to take action on issues that are important to the group

**Political Participation**

an activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action

**Tea Party Movement**

a loose network of conservative activists organized to protest high taxes, excessive government spending, and big government in general

**Voter Mobilization**

the process of motivating citizens to vote

**Voting Age Population (VAP)**

the number of U.S. residents who are 18 years of age or older

**Voting Eligible Population (VEP)**

the number of U.S. residents who are legally qualified to vote

**Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of the ways in which people can participate in the policy process?

2. How does the level of voter participation in the U.S. compare with the level of participation in other democracies?

3. How have voter participation rates in the U.S. changed since the early 1960s? Why?

4. What is the significance of low voter turnout? What steps could be taken to increase voter turnout?

5. What factors are most closely related to levels of individual participation?

**Interactive Activity**

**Simulation: You Are an Informed Voter Helping Your Classmates Decide How to Vote**

The most common form of modern political participation is voting, and yet voter turnout in the United States is low. Scholars have long debated the reasons for poor turnout. One possible reason is that many people do not follow politics closely enough to know who to for. How can you make sure your vote advances your personal political values? Are you better represented by a Democrat, a Republican, or an independent or minor party candidate? Where can you get information on a candidate’s voting record to help you make the best choices? In this activity, you will examine these and other issues as an informed voter who must help classmates determine how best to vote. In the process, you will learn how to research candidates voting record and positions on issues, identify how to use this information to make your own voting decisions, examine whether party identification is not a true predictor of a candidates stance on a particular issue, understand the use of voting records in retrospective voting, and explore the tactic basing a vote on a particular issue preference known as policy voting.

[View Simulation](http://www.ablongman.com/cmsredirects/long_mypoliscilab_2009/sim.youareaninfvothelpclassdec.html)

**“Talking About American Government” Podcasts**

Author Neal Tannahill discusses the most important concepts in this chapter

* [Political Participation](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch05_participation.mp3)
* [Voter Turnout](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch05_voter_turnout.mp3)